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Ex-spy, in Hub, tells about the KGB

By Gloria Negri
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He is not the suave, steely eyed man central casting would choose to play a Soviet spy in a James Bond movie. Fiftyish and graying, avuncular in manner and pudgy around the waistline, Imants Lesinskis looks more like a prosperous businessman than the spy with the Soviet KGB he once was.

For survival purposes, Lesinskis discarded his old name with his old life. That chapter, he tells you in heavily accented English, ended in 1978 when, while a senior official with the Russian delegation to the United Nations, he defected and was given asylum in the United States.

He says he had been a spy for the KGB, the Soviet secret police, for more than 20 years and at the time of his defection was a KGB lieutenant colonel getting paid, he said, an annual salary of \$30,000 by the United Nations Secretariat.

"My job," he said, "was to build up an espionage and intelligence network on the basis of ethnicity." During his KGB incarnation, he said he was also sent on spy missions to the Olympic games in Italy in 1960, in Austria in 1964 and in Munich in 1972, "leading a so-called delegation of Soviet cultural workers."

Lesinskis was in Boston recently to address the Latvian community and in Auburn to talk to the New England Society of Newspaper Editors. He told them the KGB sends spies into political emigre communities in the noncommunist world in the guise of scientific and intellectual exchanges or as peace emissaries to thwart efforts of the exiles to work to free their homelands from Russian rule. He said church groups are similarly misled by Soviet peace groups.

The Baltic countries of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were annexed by the Soviet Union after World War II.

Lesinskis said well-meaning but naive groups and individuals in the US high-tech and scientific communities invite counterpart Russian groups here and that a KGB agent is always among them for purposes of industrial espionage, gaining information about America's progress in those fields.

It was "common knowledge," he said, "in Riga, [the capital of Latvia], and in Moscow that the Soviet Union was behind the West in laser and computer technology, and so espionage was

considered the best way to narrow the gap." Lesinskis thinks the Soviet Union has developed "serious military capabilities" in antisatellite weaponry "while the US is doing nothing now but talking about it."

He said he knows how KGB front groups work from experience. In 1956 he got a job with the Latvian Friendship Society in Riga. "It's a branch of the Latvian KGB and my work there was to spy on western friendship delegations," he said.

Might not have graduated

A student at Moscow State Institute for Foreign Relations at the time, Lesinskis said he was blackmailed into becoming a spy when the KGB found out he had concealed the fact on his academic record that his father had served in the German army. The knowledge would have prevented him from graduating, he said.

In 1970, Lesinskis was chairman of the Committee for Relations with Latvians Abroad, "another KGB front organization whose aim was to infiltrate and then subvert exiled communities in Europe and America."

While spying by the KGB is done on a worldwide basis, Lesinskis said the United States and Canada are "principal targets, based on their ethnic communities. There were documents in my safe in Riga signed by Yuri Andropov [the late Soviet premier and former head of the KGB], identifying the two countries that way," Lesinskis said.

An example of the KGB's ethnic espionage, Lesinskis said, was the Armenian KGB officers from the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic being "extremely active" among the large Armenian community in Beirut. "I suspect that part of that mess in Lebanon is probably a result of those cultural ties between the Armenian KGB and the Armenian community there," he said.

There was no doubt in his mind, he said, that the KGB was active in Central America.

Latvian by birth, Lesinskis was accompanied in Boston by Arisids Lamberg, vice president of the American-Latvian Assn. in the United States and director of the Baltic-American Freedom League. Because Lesinskis has assumed a new identity as a United States citizen he refused to be photographed, nor would he say where he and his wife Rasma live or what work he does.

He was, he said, aware of the dangers of his defection but said he did not live in constant fear of the KGB tracking him down. "I am a fatalist as is my wife. We feel there is a danger, OK, but I don't feel frightened or paranoid. We live a full and generally successful life in this country," he said.